

MORE STORIES FROM
BIRDLAND

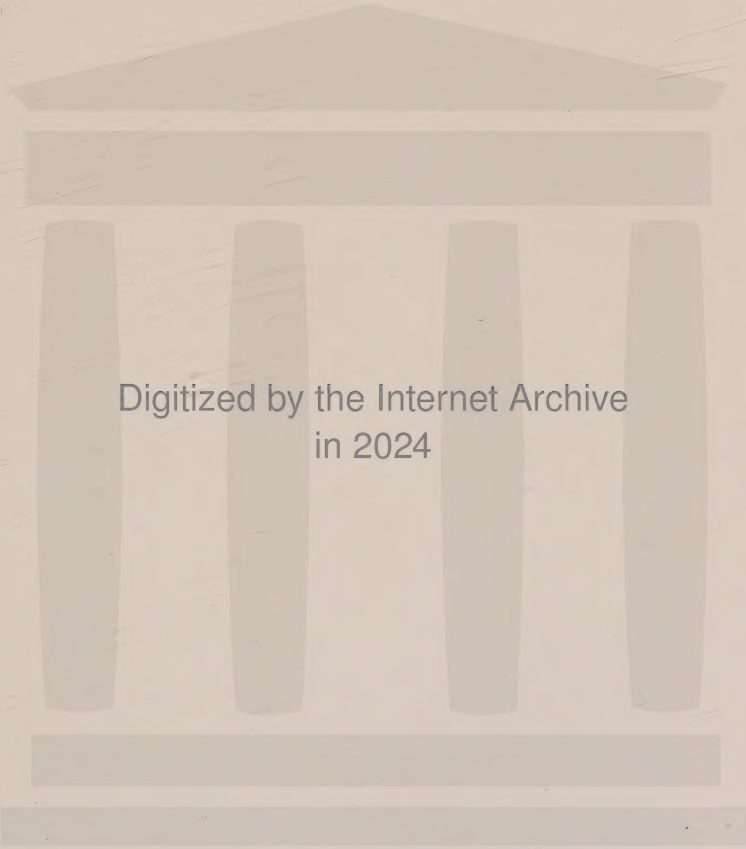


OLIVER PIKE

Arthur Mait

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MORE STORIES FROM BIRDLAND



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THE AUTHOR IN HIS BIRD-TENT FROM WHICH MANY OF THE PHOTOGRAPHS IN
THIS BOOK WERE TAKEN

Frontispiece.

MORE STORIES FROM BIRDLAND

By OLIVER G. PIKE,
F.Z.S., F.R.P.S., M.B.O.U.

Illustrated with 27 Photographs taken by the Author

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CHAPTER I

THE QUEEN OF A HIGHLAND LOCH

WHEN looking at a map of the British Islands, it does not look a very extensive place, yet there are journeys that take many days even when travelling by express train and boat. It was one of these journeys that I had to take before I was able to look upon that beautiful water-bird, the Black-throated Diver. It has been called the queen of the loch on which it lived, for its wonderful feathers and its grace on the water made it a bird that anyone would admire.

My readers can imagine how anxious I was to see this beautiful bird, and on arriving at my distant hotel, it was not long before I was tramping the eight long miles to the lake on which I knew the bird nested.

It is not easy to describe the Diver's haunt, for it is different from all other places that we might imagine

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birds to nest in. On the south side of the island there is a small mountain, and when you stand on the summit of this you obtain a wonderful panorama of the country beneath you. Stretching for twelve miles or more you see a mixture of water and land. The sea juts in, in many places, and the salt-water lochs are of fantastic and curious shapes, while all over the island there are hundreds of fresh-water lochs. Some of these are very small, others more than a mile across. On the largest are just about four hundred little grassy islands, and it was on one of these that the Divers had their home.

At the end of my eight-mile tramp, I failed to see the bird, but the next day I hired a pony and trap, but the slow pony, which walked up-hill, walked very gingerly down-hill, and trotted very carefully on the level, took almost as long as my walking to do the distance.

It seemed that we had a difficult task before us, for on that large lake there was only one pair of Divers, and their nest was on one of the small grass-covered islands. We searched each one carefully as we came to it, and fortunately started the right end of the loch, for after rowing for about an hour we saw the two large eggs that we recognized as those of the Black-throated Diver. There was very little attempt at nest-making, for this bird is content with a slight



THE BLACK-THROATED DIVER ON HER NEST

THE QUEEN OF A HIGHLAND LOCH

scratching in the ground, with just a few grasses placed in it. The eggs are always laid close to the water's edge, and I will tell you why.

On the water the Diver is a very clever swimmer and diver, in the air she is a wonderfully swift flier, but on the land she is almost helpless. Her legs are placed very far back on her body, and when she wishes to walk, she stands upright, throws herself down on to her breast, then draws her legs forward as far as she can, stands up again, and by travelling over the land in this clumsy manner, she is able to get along. You can, therefore, understand that a bird which is so helpless on land likes to have her nest close to the water's edge, so that if disturbed she can shuffle off and get to the water, where she is perfectly at home.

The Diver has keen ears, and will hear you approaching long before you reach her ; she then scrambles off her eggs, and directly she reaches the water, she stretches out her long neck in front of her, pushes off from the land, glides out for several yards, then submerges herself like a submarine going under the surface. By doing this she does not leave behind a tell-tale splash or ripples, like many diving birds would do, and it is more difficult for an observer to tell from which point she left the bank.

I built a hiding-place out on the water, a small circular house of rocks and stones, and went inside

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this with my camera and waited. It is more than fascinating to be so near to such a beautiful bird, without it knowing of your presence. She was only twelve feet away from me, and was perfectly unconscious that any one was watching her. This is the successful way to watch birds. If you take the trouble to build a "hide" near the nest of any bird, you must make it as much like the surroundings as possible, and it is always as well to use materials that are close at hand, for then, no matter how wild or shy the bird may be, it will see nothing very unusual near its home. Also, if you wish to observe the birds as they ought to be observed, that is, to have them quite unconscious of your presence, you should always take with you two or three companions, and when you are comfortably tucked up inside your shelter, they should walk away. Few birds are able to count up to the number four, and many times I have been close to our shyest birds by carrying out this little ruse.

Soon after I was inside my small stone house, I heard a loud splashing outside, and I knew that my bird was near. She did not hesitate long, but landed on the bank, shuffled clumsily towards her eggs in the manner I have described, stood up in front of them and the next moment threw her body down upon them. She now wriggled about until the eggs

THE QUEEN OF A HIGHLAND LOCH

were in a comfortable position underneath her, and settled down. After sitting there for about an hour, she left the nest, entered the water, and had a swim round.

It was now that a tragedy nearly happened at the nest. On the main island there were several pairs of Hooded Crows, and these, as my readers will learn in another chapter, are great robbers.

While the Diver was on the water, a Crow came sailing over, and seeing the Diver's eggs made a swoop down at them. Both the bird and I saw the robber at the same moment. The bird made a wild rush towards her eggs, and I gave a great shout. Also many Gulls swooped down at the robber, and in the confusion the Diver was not scared by my shout as I thought she would be, but reached her eggs, and covered them, while the Crow was driven off by the Gulls.

When the young Divers leave their shells, they are well looked after by their mother. She carries them on her back when they are quite small, and you will see her swimming about with two tiny heads peeping out from under her back feathers. If you are able to watch without them knowing of your presence, you will see two plump round bodies appear, and they will tumble down their parent's back into the water. She dives, and brings up a small fish, and there is a

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great scramble to be the first to reach her, for the one that gets there first obtains the prize. When the baby Divers are a fortnight old, they will dive for food themselves, and soon become quite proficient at capturing fish. Under the water the Divers travel at a great rate, for the birds use their wings as well as their feet to propel them along. They can swim as fast as the trout which are found in such numbers in these Highland lochs.

Black-throated Divers are essentially birds of the water, but in the early spring we see them in the air, and it is then that we realize what rapid fliers they are. The male birds will fly high up over the lochs, calling *kop-op-op-op-op-op*, and the hens down on the water answer, *ker-o-war, ker-o-war*. These birds of such wild and desolate spots have notes that are in harmony with the bleak surroundings. They are harsh, and there is little music in them.

In these romantic haunts one misses the songs of the smaller birds. I spent altogether five weeks there, and when I travelled south again, and stood under the shade of some green trees, I thought they were some of the most beautiful things I had ever seen, for on those desolate moors where we find the Diver there are no trees. The tallest thing that grows there is rough coarse heather, which is in places five feet high. But when you see these spots at



THE NEST AND EGGS OF THE BLACK-THROATED DIVER

THE QUEEN OF A HIGHLAND LOCH

their best they are in their own way very beautiful. They are certainly unlike the landscapes of the south, there could not be a greater contrast. Over all there is a great silence, only broken by the cries of the birds. You hear the wail of the Red-throated Diver, which sounds like the groan of a man in pain; the far-reaching *kop-op-op-op-op* of the larger Black-throated Diver, and the harsh answering cry of the female, *ker-o-war*. Then there is the deep-sounding call of the wild Geese, *kur-kur-kur-wonk*, *ker-wonk*, and the loud whistle of their wings as they fly past. Now and then you hear the shrill *pee-pee-pee* of the Sand-piper, as it flies from one rock to another; the rude calls of the Gulls, and the short, sharp bark of the Greater Black-backed Gull, and out towards the mountain there is the croak of the big black Raven. Now and again these rough notes break the silence, but one could often listen for an hour without hearing a single sound to disturb the calm.

It is in places like this that we must go to see the Black-throated Diver, for the bird is one of the wildest that we have in these islands; but when after days of travelling and searching, you at last see this queen of the water in its own wild home, you feel that you have been well repaid for all your trouble.

CHAPTER II

THE OUTLAW OF THE FIELDS

THERE are robbers to be found in almost every country in the world. They have always been amongst us, and I expect they always will be. Even in Birdland, a place which we associate with everything that is beautiful and good, we find them. In fact, the more we study wild Nature, the more we find that it is just one long story of bird preying upon bird, and the mammal attempting to kill its neighbour.

The very worst robber to be found in the whole of Birdland is the Carrion Crow, and its very near relation the Hooded Crow. I have come across these birds in all parts of the British Islands, and my observations amount to a record of robbery.

In the lowlands of the south and middle of England, the Carrion Crow is found everywhere. It even nests within a few miles of London, returning to the same locality, and in many cases the same tree, season after season. The birds are certainly some of the most knowing to be found anywhere, and they will nearly always choose a tree that it is exceedingly difficult to climb. It is when they have young, and when

THE OUTLAW OF THE FIELDS

they have difficulty in obtaining sufficient food for their hungry family, that they do such damage amongst other and smaller birds. I have watched them systematically hunting a large orchard, and robbing all the nests they found, and they will take eggs or young birds.

A few years ago I heard a great commotion in the orchard outside my study window. I knew that there was a nest of the Mistle-Thrush in an apple tree, and on looking out I saw a Carrion Crow standing by the nest helping herself to the eggs. The two Thrushes were flying frantically around, darting at the robber, and doing their best to drive her away, but she, being so much stronger, had little to fear, and devoured all the five eggs before I could get to the nest to frighten her off. I saw this same Crow go to a nest which contained five young Blackbirds; she took away two as food for her own babies, and although I covered the nest over, and protected it as much as possible, she returned and took them all.

One nesting season I made a journey altogether of about sixteen hundred miles to find and photograph the nest of the Wild Goose. This bird builds its nest on the ground amongst tall heather, and it is very difficult to discover, but after a long search I found one containing three goslings just out of their shells. I built a hide for myself and my camera, went

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inside and waited. The mother soon returned and sat by the nest, but not actually on her young. Suddenly I heard her give a cry, and at the same moment I saw a black form swoop past the nest, and saw that it was a Hooded Crow which had its nest close by. In darting past, although she did not settle, she managed to snatch up one of the Goslings. A few minutes later she returned and had another, and before another hour had passed she had stolen all three. What surprised me most was that the mother Goose stood by and allowed the robber to do this. The Goose has been called the fool of Birdland, and after witnessing this incident, I came to the conclusion that she really was. She was very much larger than the thief, yet did not make any attempt to protect her young.

This Hooded Crow had been robbing so many nests, that the gamekeeper over whose land the bird roamed, decided to trap or shoot it. So he waited at the nest, in hiding, with his gun, and succeeded in shooting one of the birds. Twelve hours later the remaining bird had found another mate, and strange to say it had mated up with a Carrion Crow, and they were both feeding the young in the nest. But these robbers were in their turn robbed, for before another day had passed, their own young were taken by a stoat !



THE CARRION CROW

THE OUTLAW OF THE FIELDS

It was on the same northern island on which I tried to photograph the Goose that we saw another interesting incident that proves what a robber the Crow is. A Gull had been flying around a farmyard, and had managed to pick up a Gosling, and was flying off with this in her beak, when a Crow gave chase. He had been watching the Gull, and as soon as it obtained food, he decided to have it. He quickly gained on the Gull, flew around and tried to take the Gosling, but the Gull hung on. The latter managed to get away, with the Crow flying full speed behind, and when he caught up to her, he grabbed her tail in his beak. This was more than the Gull could stand, for a feather was pulled right out, and in fright she gave a scream, dropped the Gosling, and the Crow instantly swooped down and picked it up. It was a real instance of the robber being robbed.

Not very far from the farm where the above incident took place, some Lesser Black-backed Gulls were nesting. If there is one egg that the Crow really loves it is the Gull's. Three Hooded Crows were trying to drive a Gull from her nest, but she fought them for many minutes to protect her three large eggs. They pecked at her body, and attacked her in front and behind, but she refused to give way. Then two of the Crows caught hold of her wings, and holding them at the tips, stretched them out, and pulled her

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off the nest, while the third broke open the eggs, and eventually all three greedily gobbled them up !

In the heart of Wales, where that beautiful and large bird of prey, the Buzzard, nests, I have often seen the Crows fighting the Hawks. They have wonderful battles in the air, all four birds circling round and dodging about, and when looking on these aerial battles, you see flight in perfection. The Buzzards usually succeed in driving the Crows from their haunt, but I have known the latter to win, and swoop down to the Buzzards' nest and take their eggs.

One of the rarest nesting birds to be found in the British Islands is the Kite. About three hundred years ago this bird was so common in the country, that it was found in the London streets, and acted there as a scavenger. Nowadays there are only about ten pairs left, and these birds are carefully protected by a few bird-lovers who provide funds to supply watchers to guard the nests. On several occasions the eggs have suddenly disappeared, and Carrion Crows have been the culprits.

But although this bird is black in plumage, its nature is not altogether as black as its feathers. It has a kind heart when it comes to looking after its own young, and if we searched Birdland over, it would be difficult to find a more devoted mother than the Carrion Crow. It will protect its own young



NEST AND EGGS OF CARRION CROW

THE OUTLAW OF THE FIELDS

to the death, and will fight any other wild creature that attacks its nest. If one should lose its mate the remaining bird will show keen signs of grief.

A pair of Crows had their nest not far from my home, and a farmer shot one of the birds to place in his field as a "scarecrow." Day after day the bird that was left sat disconsolate at the top of a tree not very far away, where he could see his dead mate. Often he uttered a loud cry, as if he was calling her to him. A few days later I discovered him dead under the tree, and on examining him, I found that he was starved. There was plenty of food around, yet he had refused to eat, and just pined until he died.

The Carrion Crow mates for life, and this pair had lived and roamed over this haunt for many years. Their nest was built in a magnificent oak, one of the finest in Middlesex, and as it was impossible to climb the tree they nearly always succeeded in rearing a family. I often saw them with their young, teaching them to fly, or showing them where the best food was found, and always I noticed how careful the parents were to look after them and guard them from all danger. While the mother was with them, the male would be on guard, and the instant danger threatened he would give the cry of alarm which they all knew, and the mother would always lead her babies away from the danger.

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The Carrion Crow may be black ; we know that he is cruel, and a desperate thief withal ; but under his dusky plumage there beats a true heart, and he treats his mate and young with a love greater than any to be found elsewhere in Birdland.

CHAPTER III

TENANTS OF A STONY WASTE

I WANT my readers to try to picture in their minds a great area of flat land, stretching for as far as the eye can reach, and covered with stones. Just stones everywhere, washed and worn round by the action of sea water countless ages ago. Dotted about this expanse are here and there little patches of green, where coarse grass has sprung up, and on these there are stunted furze bushes, with their brilliant yellow flowers, and foxgloves covered with bright pink bloom. Although so flat, and seeming so free from wild life, it is a beautiful scene, and strange to say the home during the nesting season of many kinds of birds.

These birds, which lay their eggs upon the stones, make no nest. Their eggs are exactly like the stones, and they are most difficult to discover. In the first place it is not easy to walk over the round pebbles, but the natives of that part have overcome this difficulty by using what are called "backstays." These are flat boards, one being placed under each boot. There is a loop of leather in front under which the foot is slipped, and you really shuffle along. It is

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certainly easier to travel in this way, but when a number of people are walking together there is a great noise. As we push our feet forwards the rolling stones make a clatter, then the heel of the boot comes down with a flap on to the wood, and makes more noise !

The most interesting little bird to be found on these stones is the Kentish Plover. The eggs are certainly the most difficult of all to discover of the birds which lay on this beach. But it is most interesting work searching for them. It is a different kind of birds-nesting to any to be found in these Islands. The only way to discover them is to watch the birds. We walked about three miles over the roughest shingle, beneath a blazing hot sun, in order to find a clutch of eggs to photograph. After a long search we saw two little birds running hither and thither about two hundred yards away, but on watching them through our field-glasses they were seen to be Ringed Plovers, birds which are far more common. For another hour we lay on the stones, searching the beach before us, but failed to see a sign of the birds. There was only one other spot that they haunted and that was quite four miles away, hence there was nothing to be done but to continue our laborious tramp over the rough surface to that spot.

On reaching this place, and watching carefully, our hopes were raised, for about two hundred yards off



KENTISH PLOVER ON HER EGGS

TENANTS OF A STONY WASTE

a bird was seen to leave a certain spot and run fast over the stones. We recognized it as the bird that we wanted, kept our eyes glued to the spot that it left, and went forward. On arriving there we made careful search, and were soon rewarded by seeing two eggs on the stones.

The eggs of the Kentish Plover cannot be confounded with those of any other British bird. The almost black zig-zag markings on a clay-brown shell at once distinguish them. The birds run about the shingle with the utmost grace and agility, and it is an extremely fascinating sight to watch them with a field-glass, as they run about near their eggs. The male was seen on the sand of the sea-shore elegantly picking up food which was left by the receding waves. When enough had been gathered, he would swiftly fly to his sitting mate, to feed her with the dainty morsels.

I fixed up my bird tent near the eggs, went inside with my cameras and waited. In less than an hour the hen Plover was back, and she settled down. But as I watched her I noticed a curious thing. About fifteen minutes later she went to another spot on the stones and again settled. There she remained for a quarter of an hour and returned to her two eggs. All through the day she kept changing in this manner. I could not see from my place of concealment what it

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was she sat on when she left, but when I got out, I examined the stones, and found that she had a third egg about four feet from the two. This knowing little Plover was not able to move this egg, and so she took turns in sitting upon them! Whether she eventually hatched all three I was never able to find out.

Numbers of Terns lay their eggs on these stones, and most graceful birds they are too. Another name for them is Sea Swallows, and certainly, if we searched Birdland over it would be hard to find more beautiful flight. They fly over the shallow water with aerial grace, dipping down when they see a small fish near the surface, and do not even wet their wings as they drop down on to it. The Lesser Tern is a very tame bird, and will allow you to get to within a dozen yards of her as she sits upon her eggs. Then when you approach a little closer she will fly up, mount above you, and with a shrill cry, *kipps, kipps*, come down straight at your head. She will not actually strike you, but she comes as close as she can without touching. The whole colony around will join in the chorus, and the males come up from the sea to join their mates, and in this manner they try to drive you from their haunt.

On this great stony waste there are several old tins, rusted with age. These may have been washed up

TENANTS OF A STONY WASTE

by the tide, and then blown far from the shore. Such an article is hardly the kind of place one would expect to find a nest in, yet the Wheatears that frequent the beach are very fond of them. If we do have the good fortune to find one, there is almost sure to be a Wheatear's nest inside or underneath. For generations past the birds have nested in these strange places, and I have often found that when birds have been reared in uncommon articles like this, the young, when they build nests for themselves, think that it is the one and only place in which to make their home. So they search around for a similar thing. I have known them, in the absence of tins, to build their nest under a discarded silk hat, and even in a portion of an exploded shell.

The Common Tern is larger than the one previously mentioned, but all the same quite as charming a bird. I found a nest, if we can call it thus. It contained one egg, and one young bird, and I did not have to wait long before the mother returned. Two hours later her mate appeared, and in his beak he had a fish. The youngster had not long left its shell, and was very small. The fish was probably the first this apparently eager father had caught for his baby, and he—just like a father—did not quite understand what was required. Anyway, the fish was twice the size of the young Tern, and of course it could not

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swallow it. He walked round it, pushed the fish towards its beak, and did all he could to make it take it from him, but the tiny bird kept up a continuous squeak, and showed plainly that it could not take such a large piece of food. Eventually he offered it to his mate, but she would not take it, and so after all his trouble he had to eat it himself!

While in the Terns' haunt we suddenly heard a great commotion. Herring Gulls are very fond of Terns' eggs, and one of these large birds was making a raid on the colony. Uttering loud harsh screams, *chee-u-i, chee-u-i*, intermingled with the shorter cries of the smaller Terns, *kipps, kipps*, a whole crowd of the birds went full speed after the robber. Some lined up on either side of him, others flew above or below, but all kept making vicious darts at him. Under pressure from this formidable force, the prisoner for the time being was led, or perhaps it would be better to say driven, from the eggs, far out to sea.

On this large shingle beach, which was once the sea-bottom, there are two fresh-water lakes. Around the margins of these numbers of Black-headed Gulls make their nests. Although a sea-gull, this bird does not nest on the cliffs of the seashore, but flies far inland and lays its eggs on the ground around the margins of a lake, or amongst the grass on a desolate



LITTLE TERN

TENANTS OF A STONY WASTE

moor. I have found the eggs fifty miles from the sea. The birds have their nests dotted about the shingle, and also amongst the reeds on the margins of the lakes. This is the Gull that in the winter months has made a habit of coming to London. About twenty-five years ago a very severe winter drove the birds inland, as there was little food in their usual haunts. Some visited this great city, and the amount of food they obtained from the thousands of people who watched them circling around the bridges on the Thames, caused them to return the following winter. Birds seldom forget a kindness, and they not only returned but brought others with them, with the result that at the present time very large flocks come each season. Anyone not acquainted with the bird would think, on looking on it for the first time, in the winter months, that it was wrongly named, for the head, instead of being black, is white. In the winter time, the feathers on the head are white, but as soon as the warm weather approaches, sometimes at the end of January, the feathers quickly turn very dark brown, but never actually black.

When we first glance at this stretch of shingle, with its miles of rounded stones, we see few signs of bird life, but as we traverse it, and search its apparently deserted surface, we find that it is full of interest. There are birds everywhere, but their small bodies,

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like their eggs, harmonize with their surroundings, and this is their means of protection. The eggs themselves are hard to distinguish from the stones, and when the birds themselves squat almost flat on them, they are even more difficult to discover. Most birds have enemies, but Nature has provided these stone-dwellers with plumage so perfect, that even their worst enemies would have difficulty in discovering them.

CHAPTER IV

THE FAIRY OF THE NIGHT

FOR about eight months the Nightjar had been living in a southern forest, but for a week past a spirit of unrest had seized him, for he had a strong desire to leave the warmth and comfort of his home and to fly northwards. One evening in May he obeyed this call which was so strong within him, and launching out into the dark night he flew into the unknown. High up into the cooler air he flew, and then hour after hour travelled onwards, until with the approach of daylight he descended and rested in a forest more dense, and hotter than the one he left. Again when the sun went down he and many more of his companions flew on towards the north again, and after many more days and nights of travelling they found themselves over the shores of England. But even now their journey was not finished, for some had to travel still farther north, others went east, others west, but all went straight to their old haunts, where they had spent previous summers.

The one of our story found his way to an old quarry on a Welsh hillside, and it was there that I saw him

MORE STORIES FROM BIRDLAND

one evening at the end of May. The sun had sunk, in a halo of red and deep gold. Most of the birds had sought their perches on the thickly-leaved trees, and with heads tucked into feathers were oblivious of the numerous enemies that are ever on the look-out for them, for the birds have far more enemies to contend with at night than in the hours of sunshine.

There was a great silence over the valley, with the exception of the soft music of the stream beyond the meadow. I was standing by the old gate, for it was there that the Nightjars came in the twilight. At this corner, where the meadow joined the wood, they found a good supply of food, and it was a fine point for observation, for the trees stood out against the sky, sharp and clear.

For some minutes before I could see the birds they could be heard, for their quaint and curious note seemed to make the very air tremble. The long-continued note can best be likened to a fisherman's reel, when the line is running out. It is a continued *tr-rr-rr-rr-rr-rr-rr*, uttered in two keys. For ten seconds or so the bird utters it in the higher key, then, as if taking breath, changes over to the lower. When you are close to the bird this curious song seems to have a most remarkable effect upon you. It can best be described by likening it to the feeling, only in a milder form, that one experiences when standing



THE NIGHTJAR COVERING HER YOUNG

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THE FAIRY OF THE NIGHT

on a rapidly vibrating object. The air, in fact, seems to be vibrating in response to the bird's note.

Presently I saw one of the Nightjars. He was flitting like a fairy round and about the branches. I saw him go back to a thick branch, and on this he settled, not across it as most birds would have done, but along it, so that it was difficult to distinguish him from his perch. Close to him I saw another bird. He now slowly went towards this, and with his wings drooping, he uttered that strange tremulous song. Perhaps I should not call it a song, but nevertheless to the bird he is wishing to woo, it is as sweet music as that uttered by the Nightingale to his mate. When close to her, he raised and lowered his wings, his large head was lifted, and he tried to bow before her. As he approached, she retreated, and threw herself up into the air; he quickly followed, and the two birds now went through a series of wonderful evolutions round and over the tree-tops. They resembled just what we should imagine fairies to be like. They fluttered, hovered, and darted about. Up and around, and back again, seeming all the time to be lighter than the air in which they played. Right up to the highest branch of the tree-tops one went, and the other glided up after her. The first one now dived with wings partly raised, and the other dropped noiselessly after her. Then suddenly pulling up,

MORE STORIES FROM BIRDLAND

he executed the most marvellous twists and turns, every now and then striking his wings together so that they made a resounding click. For only a few minutes did they rest, then up they went again, higher this time, and when right up above the trees came the most beautiful movement of all. With wings raised and extended, the two birds slowly descended, not in a spiral, as most birds would have done, but in a perfectly straight line, side by side, until the lower branch was reached. Now that long trembling song rang out again, and for an hour those two fairy-like birds played their game in the twilight. When this gave place to the darkness of the summer night, the music still went on, played to the accompaniment of the running river and the gently rustling leaves.

A few days later I was in the old quarry again, but there was no sign of the Nightjars, for in the hours of daylight they rest. It is when the moths are out and about that they seek their food. I searched carefully around, and on the ground amongst some dead leaves and decayed wood, I saw something that many would have taken for a lump of rotten wood, but I happened to catch sight of a bright bead showing between two partly closed eyelids, and on looking again, I saw that that piece of wood was the body of a bird, a bird so marked that it exactly resembled the surroundings amongst which it was sitting. Slowly



YOUNG NIGHTJARS

THE FAIRY OF THE NIGHT

and cautiously I crept towards it, but when only a yard away, there was a flutter of graceful wings, but hardly a sound as the Nightjar flitted past my head. On the ground where she had been sitting there were two white eggs covered over with black, brown and lilac markings. There was no nest, just the eggs on the bare ground.

I retreated to a short distance, hid behind a bush, and presently the Nightjar came down again, flitted over her eggs like a great moth for a moment or two, then dropped down on to them and settled comfortably.

Three weeks later I was there again; the eggs had hatched, for I could see peeping from underneath each wing of the parent, a small downy head. The mother had her eyes closed as if asleep, and the young birds followed her example. But I soon discovered that she was very wide awake, for as I approached, she flitted up, and disclosed the two babies. These allowed me to photograph them, then ran off and were soon lost in the undergrowth.

When the sun has set, the two parents get very busy collecting moths and flies for their young. They hover and fly around about the trees, and also search the meadows for winged insects. Especially do they like to fly around cattle, for it is here that they are able to collect more flies, and it is owing to their habit

MORE STORIES FROM BIRDLAND

of flying around cows that they have obtained the name of Goatsucker, for this is a popular name given to the bird in many parts. In some country districts the farmer will tell you that this strange bird that is seen hovering around the cattle, takes their milk ! But the Nightjar, instead of being a robber, is a friend to the cattle and relieves them of thousands of flies which torment them. Some farmers will shoot the birds because they firmly believe this fable. But many British farmers destroy birds that do good, and allow those to frequent their farms which do harm. For instance, some will shoot Owls, and Hawks and Nightjars, and will allow the Carrion Crow to remain. The Owls and Hawks destroy more mice and rats in the course of twelve months than fifty well-kept traps, while the Carrion Crow, a great destroyer of insect-eating birds and their eggs, is not molested. But there never was a more ridiculous statement made than that which gives the Nightjar the credit of taking milk. He is entirely an insect-eating bird, and one of the most useful we have.

The Nightjars remained in the deserted quarry all through the summer ; many young were reared there by the several pairs that made that corner their home. But with the approach of autumn, that same mysterious voice that told them to fly north, now told them that it was time to desert the lanes and woods of Wales,

THE FAIRY OF THE NIGHT

and that if they wished to live they must fly south again, to the sunny lands where during the months of our winter they could find a supply of insect food. And so up again they went, along that aerial pathway that led to sunshine, warmth and food in abundance.

CHAPTER V

THE HUNTER OF THE GLEN

ALL the birds of the countryside seemed to fear the bold Sparrow-Hawk. Whenever he wandered forth, all the smaller birds took cover, or kept still upon their perches. The ground birds squatted low amongst the grass ; the Lapwings gave their warning cry, and their small fluffy young pushed their heads into a grass-tuft, no doubt thinking that if they could not see the enemy, he could not see them ! The Skylarks brooded over their babies, keeping one eye upon the large outlaw, until he was out of sight.

His nest was in the glen at the entrance to the wood. It was not many feet up the tree, and from below you could see that it was dotted all over with small tufts of down, and often as I went by I could see the bright eye of the hen Sparrow-Hawk as she sat upon her five handsomely-marked eggs.

When the young appeared, they were small downy creatures, but there was no doubt about them having a large appetite, for the parents were kept busy all day in bringing food to them.

The Sparrow-Hawk is one of the boldest and



THE SPARROW-HAWK AT HER NEST

THE HUNTER OF THE GLEN

pluckiest of all our Hawks. If he is fond of sport, then he must have an exciting existence, for the whole of his life is occupied in hunting. I have often seen him chasing and striking down his quarry, and when we look at the way in which he collects his food, it seems to be a cruel life. But all Nature is cruel, if we consider it from our standpoint, but we must remember that these birds of prey are simply collecting their food in the only way that they know how, and at the same time helping to keep up the balance of Nature. The more we study wild Nature, the more we find that the larger species prey upon the smaller, or weaker ; right down to the tiniest insect or microbe.

A few years ago I was standing on the edge of a meadow, and at the other side a Sparrow-Hawk was sitting on the parapet of a railway bridge. Not very far from where I was standing, a Skylark left the ground and began to soar up towards the sky, singing loudly the whole time. When it was up about three hundred feet, the Hawk left its perch and went quickly towards the Lark. The latter saw its danger, instantly ceased its song, and dived down towards the ground. But the Hawk was underneath, and the smaller bird found that he could not reach there, so he did the only other thing he could do to save himself, and darted off towards a large oak tree at the end of the meadow,

MORE STORIES FROM BIRDLAND

for he knew that if he could once reach the branches he would be safe, for the Sparrow-Hawk will not as a rule follow its prey into the bushes. The Merlin is the only bird that does this, and if he is foiled in the chase, and the hunted bird dives into the bushes, he will go in also.

As fast as its wings would carry it, the Lark flew towards the tree, but every second the great hunter behind was gaining. When the Lark reached the tree it was travelling at such a pace that it found it impossible to dive into the branches, so it swooped up, no doubt intending to double down the other side. But as it reached the further side of the tree, the Hawk struck. He came down like a feathered dart on to his prey, and the next thing that I saw was a small cloud of feathers floating away on the summer breeze, and a lifeless body tumbling down towards the meadow. The Hawk turned sharply, hovered for a fraction of a second above the falling Lark, dived down towards it, and picked it up in his talons.

Now the hunter carried his prey off to a small grassy mound in the field, and standing upon it, he began to pluck the feathers from the body. He looked like a fearless warrior as he stood there, with his bright keen eyes flashing. Most of the feathers were pulled from the dead Lark, then picking it up once more he carried it off to the nest in the glen,



NEST OF SPARROW HAWK

THE HUNTER OF THE GLEN

where five hungry young Sparrow-Hawks were waiting for a meal.

He stood on the edge of the nest, still holding the Lark under his claws, and pulling off tit-bits of flesh, he handed these to the young in turn. Before he had finished, the hen Sparrow-Hawk arrived with a dead Thrush, and so it went on all through the day, and all the three or four weeks that the young remained in the nest.

But this bold hunter does not always get the best of the hunt. A Sparrow-Hawk saw some young chickens in a garden belonging to a friend of mine, and from a great height the hunter swooped down towards them. He intended to pick one up as he dashed past, but in his headlong dive towards the lawn, he failed to see the wire netting placed round, and he went full-speed into this. The result was that his neck was instantly broken, and he just bounced back on to the path outside the lawn.

When the young ventured out into the world, they found at first that they could not fly with the ease of their parents, especially when a strong wind was blowing. For several days they contented themselves with just hopping about the branches around the old nest. Then they ventured farther afield, and day by day became more proficient. By the time July arrived, they had learned their lessons well, and were

MORE STORIES FROM BIRDLAND

able to hunt on their own account, and with the arrival of early autumn, their parents showed them plainly that they must now obtain their own living, for they were driven away from the haunts around the old nest in the glen, leaving that hunting ground to the two birds which had reared them.

Although there is so much cruelty in wild Nature, there is also an enormous amount of mother-love, and my experience is that the devotion these wild creatures show to their young completely overshadows all the cruelty. I should like to conclude this chapter with just three instances.

The first instance took place on one of the wildest of the Welsh mountains. I was in hiding near the nest of the Raven, waiting to obtain photographs. I had had a very successful day, but still waited on, watching the life at the nest. About two o'clock in the afternoon, the sun, working round, beat down upon the nest. There was no cover of any kind there, and three hours later life became almost unbearable for the three young. They sat in the nest with their beaks open, panting. The hen Raven came down and saw their plight. She looked at them for a few minutes, then flew to a small stream that was trickling down the rocks. Standing over this, she filled her pouch with water, went back to her young and poured this cooling drink into their open beaks. In the

THE HUNTER OF THE GLEN

ordinary way, I do not think the Raven would ever bring water to the young, but this was an exceptional instance. She saw that her young were suffering, and gave them that which she thought would relieve them.

The second instance occurred on a small island in the north. I was storm-bound there for a whole week. The great waves rolling in from the open sea beat against the rocks, and those sea-birds which had their nests low down found them quickly washed away. There was one Kittiwake in which I was specially interested. Each time at high tide, she was in danger, and I often saw her protecting her two young by covering them with her wings, and squatting low over them. Many times she was almost washed off the narrow ledge, for some of the waves went right over her body, but at the end of the week, when the storm abated, she had the satisfaction of seeing her two small babies safe and sound in the nest.

I saw the third instance around the margin of a beautiful Hertfordshire lake. Again the sun was the cause of the trouble at the nest. The Reed Warblers had built their home in a small clump of dead reeds, and as the hot sun beat down there was no protection for the young. Although she was feeling the heat greatly, the hen Warbler stood over her young to keep them in shade. She did not brood on them

MORE STORIES FROM BIRDLAND

like some birds do, by completely covering the nest, but she stood up in a most uncomfortable position so that the air would circulate under her body. But this was not enough. Each time that her mate arrived at the nest with a supply of food, she left, and I watched her throw herself into some cool water under the nest, thoroughly soak her feathers, then, quickly returning to the nest, she again stood over her babies, and allowed the drops of water to trickle down upon them. By doing this, she was able to make them a little more comfortable, and ease them from the scorching rays of the sun.

As I watched this little Warbler, it seemed to me that I was looking upon quite the most wonderful and interesting instance of mother-love that I had ever come across in the birds' world.

There certainly is an enormous amount of cruelty in the woods and fields, but it is entirely eclipsed by the wonderful love shown by all wild animals for their young.



SEDGE WARBLER

CHAPTER VI

THE STORY OF JACKY DAW

HE was the most disreputable-looking little bird-creature that I had ever set eyes upon. He was brought to my door one June morning by a small boy, and by handing the latter a small sum, I became the owner of this rough-looking black bird. I little knew that I was buying the very cheekiest bird that ever lived, and I suppose the tamest.

But before I tell you all about the doings of Jacky Daw, I had better say where he was born. At the end of the previous April, a pair of Jackdaws on the lookout for a home found the tower of the Corn Exchange in our town. Now, if there is one place that the Jackdaw loves for a nest it is a tower. I verily believe that Jacky thinks all the Church towers dotted about the land were built for him, and in most country towers and steeples, if it is possible for a Jackdaw to squeeze in, he will do it.

The two birds that selected the Corn Exchange began to build their nest; they carried in a large number of sticks, and on an untidy platform of these they placed straw, grass and shavings, and in a hollow in the centre of the heap four eggs were laid.

Eventually four little Jackdaws appeared, and they were fed by their parents until they became anxious to view the outside world. One by one they hopped to the little window through which their parents came and went, and beneath them they saw a busy world. There were strange things running backwards and forwards, lots of black dots passing and repassing on the pavements below. For a long time they watched the crowds, then one more venturesome than its brothers went just a little too far, and found itself tumbling down and down towards the strange place beneath. He landed with a bump on the road, and a big curious thing on wheels, which made a great snorting and puffing, almost ran over the small black bird. A boy ran forward, picked up the frightened little stranger, placed it in his pocket, and went on his way whistling.

On reaching home, the boy had not the slightest idea what kind of food to give the baby Jackdaw, so he fell back upon bread, and the bird ate nearly all that was offered, or at least he did so until there was absolutely no room inside him for more! Day by day he became bigger and stronger, and at last was able to fly around.

One morning he saw some big white birds being fed. It was the poultry in the next garden having their morning meal. Without a moment's hesitation

THE STORY OF JACKY DAW

he flew down and joined them. Instantly there was fright and commotion in that otherwise peaceful colony of birds, and after they had got over their first scare of seeing this small black imp land amongst them, they all with one accord set upon the stranger. For a moment or two he had a rough time, many feathers were pulled out, his back was pecked, his wings and tail dishevelled, and no doubt he would have been killed if he had not been pulled out from amongst the angry flock.

It was in this condition that he was brought to me. He had not been with us for more than a day before he made himself thoroughly at home. Not a sign of fear did he ever show. If he wanted a thing he just took it. At meal times he would fly on to the table, and if he saw one of my children putting a special tit-bit in its mouth, he flew quickly to the scene, settled upon the raised hand, and stole that morsel. He is specially fond of one of my small boys, and he often shares his meal. He will sit on the edge of his plate, drink out of his mug, and help himself to anything that he fancies.

One day I was sitting in an armchair reading the paper, when Jacky Daw landed on my shoulder with a bright thimble in his beak. My wife was doing needlework in the same room. He had taken this from her, then looked everywhere for a place in which

MORE STORIES FROM BIRDLAND

to hide it. He finally decided that the best spot in the whole room was just underneath my tie, so he carefully pushed the thimble there, then sat on my shoulder with an unconcerned look, as much as to say, "Well, no one knows where I have hidden that !"

When he is thoroughly tired of eating and playing,—for I am sure that he does amuse himself by playing—he will fly to me, make himself comfortable on my shoulder, and go to sleep. On such occasions he stands on one leg, with the other tucked up amongst his feathers.

He is specially fond of gardening. I suppose he has taken to this because it is my favourite hobby. He just loves to assist in setting seeds, and he digs them up almost as fast as I set them, and one day I caught him very carefully pulling up seedling asters. He had entered the conservatory, and was standing on the box containing the young plants, very methodically nipping them up and flinging them away !

Jacky Daw simply delights to help me with my writings. He is sitting on my wrist as I type this chapter, and now and then he hops on to the typewriter, and tries to do a little typing on his own account. Once he got quite angry with the matter that had been typed, and mounting on to the machine, he ripped the paper to pieces, and flung the shreds away !



THE JACKDAW

THE STORY OF JACKY DAW

When he is in my study I have to watch him most carefully, for he is a destructive little rascal. He will tear photographs to pieces, make holes in anything that he can bore with his sharp beak, and he is specially fond of eating or destroying stamps. I once found him with a packet of cigarettes ; he had opened the cardboard case, broken all of them, and eaten quite a quantity of tobacco, but he did not seem to be any the worse for the adventure. If at any time I reprove him, he replies with a loud *jaaack*, and often a sharp peck will follow. He is at all times a delightful little pet, and I am quite certain that he enters into his pranks with a great sense of humour.

Many birds of the Crow tribe show great intelligence. A friend of mine once had a tame Raven. This bird had many wonderful tricks, and one of his favourites was to feign death. He did this when a number of strangers were watching him from a room. He would perform a few pranks on the garden path outside, then suddenly fall upon his back, with feet stuck up in the air, and remain quite still. Those who did not know the bird would immediately run out to his assistance, and when he had a crowd around sympathizing with him, he would jump up, stalk proudly away, and utter a few loud cries which might have been an amused laugh, for on every occasion on which the bird performed this trick, he was without

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any doubt thoroughly amused at the way he had deceived the visitors.

It is always delightful to make pets of the wild creatures of the fields, and every boy and girl should have a pet. Whatever it is, learn to treat it kindly, and you will be well rewarded, for these creatures, when they love a human being, love with a big love, and become real playmates.

During the whole time that I have been typing this chapter, Jacky Daw has been with me, either on the machine or on my person, and now that I am finishing, and he has done his best to destroy the manuscript, he is resting on my field-glasses on the table by my side, and is about to enjoy a well-earned rest.

CHAPTER VII

THE HOMES ON A GIANT CRAG

FOR thirteen hundred feet the great cliff towered above the sea. The lower parts for three hundred feet were bare, all vegetation had been cleared off by the mighty waves that washed in from the Atlantic. The rocks here were polished too, for the incessant storms beating against them had rounded off the rough corners, but higher up, above these smooth rocks there towered a wall of green.

When we were some distance from the cliff, out on the open sea, it resembled a great green wall, with a black band along the bottom. On the higher parts, that is, from three hundred feet above the sea, right away to the summit, there were hundreds of thousands of tiny white dots. As the sun shone upon them, they looked like countless silver stars, set in a sky of green. Sailing about on the face of the cliff, there were also numerous moving stars of the same bright silver.

When we left the boat, and scaled the dizzy side, we at last, after a strenuous climb, found that each one of those small white dots was the breast of a

MORE STORIES FROM BIRDLAND

beautiful sea-bird known as the Fulmar Petrel. They were all around us, above and below, and their harsh cries added to the interest of the scene.

The Fulmar Petrel chooses the most precipitous cliffs for nesting, and as this cliff, on the island of St. Kilda, off the west coast of Scotland, is one of the steepest, and certainly the highest, in the British Islands, they could not have chosen a more suitable place. For many years this cliff was their only nesting place in Great Britain, but now they are increasing their range, and nesting on other cliffs around Scotland.

Although there were so many birds on the cliff it was not easy to get near them, for the rocks were treacherous, and tufts of grass hid many a loose rock. So as we climbed about it was necessary to test every foothold. Most of the nests contained young, and that made it more difficult to approach them with a camera, for the Fulmar is a curious bird. When it has an egg in the nest, the bird will sit closely upon it, and you can get almost close enough to stroke her, but directly the egg hatches, and there is a youngster there, the parent will fly away long before you get close enough to take a photograph. Most birds will fight to protect their young, but are not so keen on protecting their eggs.

After a lengthy search, I found one nest containing



THE FULMAR PETREL TURNING ON HER EGG

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THE HOMES ON A GIANT CRAG

an egg, and by careful climbing I was able to get my camera close enough to expose plates.

The natives of St. Kilda are some of the finest cragsmen in the whole world, and I envied the way my guide ran about the rocks, or climbed with ease places that looked impossible to get over. However, where he went I followed, although I had to get him to give me a helping hand. The nest towards which we were climbing was on a small ledge, on a sloping shelf of rock, which led down to a steep fall to the sea beneath. About three feet beneath the nest was a long crack, just wide enough to support one's foot, and by creeping along this, I was able to hold my camera in front of me and expose plates. The bird, although she had an egg in her nest, was rather shy, and kept leaving and flying around, and when I got closer to her I saw the reason. The egg in the nest was just on the point of hatching, and the youngster inside was about to leave its shell. Each time the bird settled, she shuffled slowly towards the egg, then stood with one leg each side of it, and with her beak pushed it well underneath her body. When this was in the desired position, she settled down, but rolled her body about until she was quite comfortable.

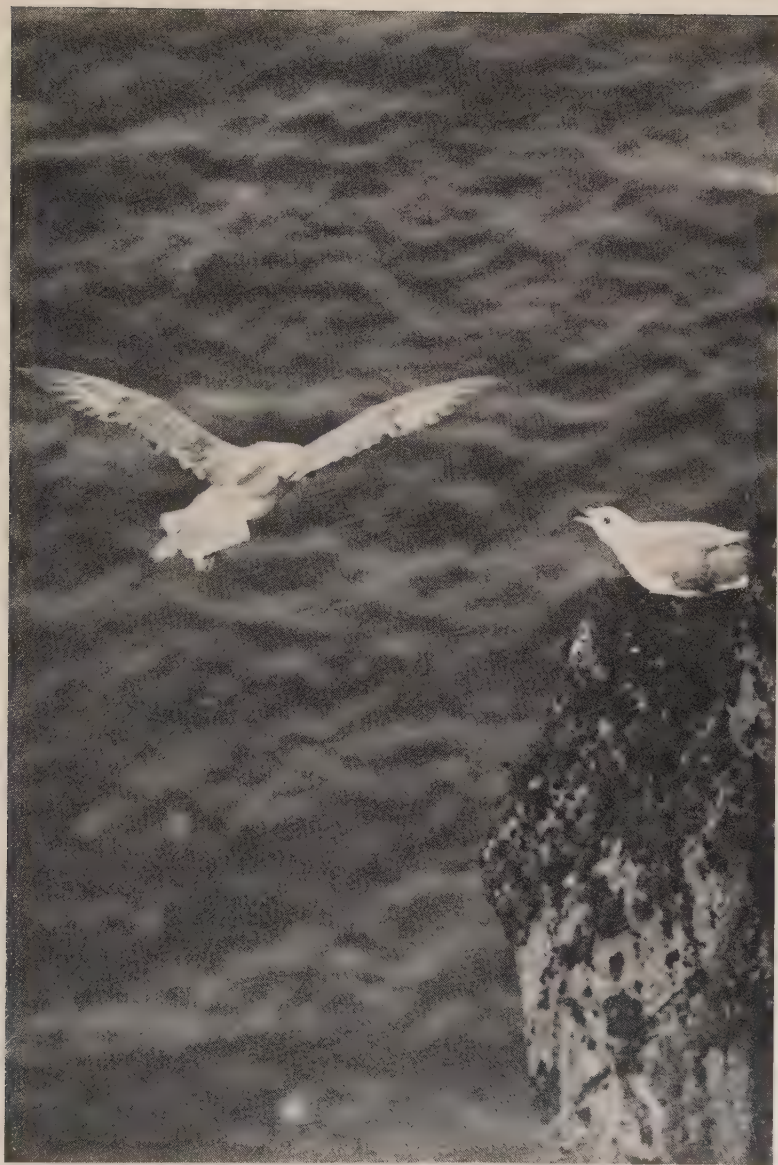
After the bird has been sitting for several hours, the egg becomes well embedded in the thick feathers

MORE STORIES FROM BIRDLAND

of her breast. If suddenly alarmed, the birds will leave, even when covering an egg, and it often happens that they carry the egg with them for several yards before it drops.

My guide was climbing about thirty yards above me, and going round a corner, he came face to face with a sitting Fulmar. The bird was so surprised that it flew off carrying its egg in the manner described. Now this egg happened to be an unfertile one. In the ordinary way the Fulmar's egg has a very strong and unpleasant smell attached to it. I was in rather a perilous position below, with my camera on my back, and it was impossible for me to get away from the egg which was now dropping down towards me. It struck a piece of rock close to my face, burst, and the contents went all over me ! It was weeks before I got away from that awful smell !

The Fulmar Petrels, both parent and young, protect themselves in a strange manner. The birds have the power of ejecting from their beaks a very pungent oil, which has a most unpleasant smell. As we go towards them, we notice they work their heads backwards and forwards, and if we are able to approach to within three or four feet we are met by a charge of this oil which they shoot from their beaks. A second and third charge follow, then the supply seems to run short, but if we wait a few minutes, the birds are



FULMAR PETREL FLYING PAST HIS SITTING MATE

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THE HOMES ON A GIANT CRAG

able to collect more in their throats, and further charges are fired at us. It is a most effective manner of driving an enemy away, for the smell of this oil is one of the most unpleasant things one desires to meet. As we climbed about amongst the birds, our clothes became splashed with it, and it was not advisable to use these clothes in civilized society again !

The flight of the Fulmar Petrel is a beautiful one. The bird gives three or four flaps, then stretching out its wings to their fullest extent, it glides for thirty or more feet, three more flaps and another glide. It is not a really fast flier, but perhaps manages to cover about forty miles per hour when going all out.

The young Fulmar Petrel forms the chief food supply of the natives of St. Kilda. In the month of August they collect thousands of the birds, for at this time they are not able to fly, but are plump and very fat, and in their very best condition. The birds are killed, the feathers are plucked from their bodies, the latter are now salted, and packed away in boxes for use in the winter months.

For nine months of the year this home of the Fulmar is cut off from the outside world, and the natives at this time rely upon the supply of sea birds which they collect in the summer months, for their food supply. It is only for three months in the summer that boats go to the island. It must be a lonely life, but they

MORE STORIES FROM BIRDLAND

seem to enjoy it, and manage to get on quite well without any news from the world beyond the waves. Most of the inhabitants have never seen a tree or a bush, for such things do not grow on their wind-swept home. They have never seen a horse. They do not know what a modern house or a street is like. The natives live to a hearty old age, and yet all their lives they do not need money. And stranger still, in this small and happy village the tax-collector is absolutely unknown, and it is a place where the women do all the hard work, and the men are the gossips! For interest and novelty it would be difficult to find another place of its kind, and it is hard to realize that such a remarkable and old-world community can be found within a three days' journey from London.

Before visiting St. Kilda, I thought I had seen large flocks of sea birds, but they were insignificant when compared with the vast flocks I saw there. As I rested on one of the sloping cliffs, the birds went past in one long unending procession. Down on the sea there were a hundred thousand more, and the passing and repassing of a million wings made a weird sound that it would be hard to describe. It was one of those marvellous birdland scenes that the pen could not do justice to, and certainly could never be forgotten. There were birds in the air, on the water, and on the cliffs, and besides the rush of their wings there was

THE HOMES ON A GIANT CRAG

the deafening sound of their cries. There is little music in the sea-birds' song, but it is quite in harmony with the wild haunts that they make their home. If, however, we managed to get to a part of the cliff frequented only by Fulmars, then there was a great contrast, for the Fulmar Petrel is a silent bird, and the scene was, if anything, more interesting. For before us there were thousands of white wings, all sailing past without a sound, and as the birds went by, it seemed that they were playing the game of "Follow the leader." The cause was soon evident, for these birds, which make their homes on steep cliffs, often have great difficulty in making a successful landing at their nest. They approach this against the wind, but there are often air-pockets and strange currents to contend with, and many times they miss their landing. So they fly onwards, make a big turn down wind, and again come up against the breeze. I saw some of them make five or six attempts before landing.

But altogether, this was a wonderful scene. It more nearly approaches what we imagine fairyland to be like than anything else we could look upon. White wings everywhere, above and below, gleaming silver in the sunshine, as the birds turned in the air. No noise save the wind playing on the grasses of the cliff, but just thousands of birds sailing dreamily about, passing and repassing in a complex maze.

CHAPTER VIII

THE CHORISTER OF THE VILLAGE

MOST birds love their old haunts. Each year when the nesting season comes round they go back to the same fields or woods that they frequented the previous year. No matter how much they may travel about in the winter months, the approach of spring sees them back in their favourite spots.

Winter had only just gone, and the first real sunny day of spring had arrived. The warmth made the birds sing. They had had good meals, and when a bird's appetite is satisfied, and there are no cold winds or frost, they just try to show the world around them how happy they can be.

As I walked down the old village, I heard a favourite song. It was the Thrush that for three years past had built his nest in the bushes beneath the tall poplars. The village stood amongst beautiful surroundings, and the Thrush as he sang looked down upon a maze of green meadows, lakes and woodland.

For three seasons the Thrush had sung from his high perch over that beautiful little hamlet, but we were all glad to hear his first notes again. Last



THE THRUSH

THE CHORISTER OF THE VILLAGE

winter his favourite tree was cut down, but he took up his position on a higher branch of a neighbouring tree. There was no mistaking this Thrush when he began, for he had a wonderful song. Birds are like human singers: their songs vary to a very great degree, and you will find that birds that live near the sea or on the hills, where the air is purer, have far finer songs than those of the woods and meadows far inland. This Thrush must have loved his village, for right through the spring and summer he sang.

We called this Thrush the Chorister of the Village, because he seemed to belong to it, and each spring as surely as we expected the bursting leaves and the blossom, we expected to hear his song. There was no Thrush for a dozen miles around who could equal him for variety of notes or loudness and purity of song.

I was listening to him one April morning; the rising sun was shining into my room, and it was impossible to sleep with that bird not far from my open window. I counted twelve changes in his song, and many of the notes he repeated five times. I noticed that sometimes he would strike a new variety of notes, and immediately afterwards he stopped. Perhaps he was trying to remember those notes to repeat them, but it was not often that he did this. If he was specially pleased with a bar of his song, he repeated it several times. Most of his bars

MORE STORIES FROM BIRDLAND

were repeated three times, but there was one glorious combination of notes that he often repeated five times. He began to sing from that high perch at the beginning of April, and for over three months he kept it up, giving out such music to that little English village, that if he had been in a town thousands would have flocked to hear him, yet here no one took much notice of him. He was just part of the old village, and we listened to his song as we did to the clanging of the lock gates, the rush of water as the locks emptied to allow a barge to pass on, or to the deep tones of the church clock as it struck out the sixteen hours through which he sang to us.

I want you now to come with me to hide in the bushes, and we will look upon one of the secrets of birdland. The Thrush is high above us giving out his loudest and best notes, and if we just look around we will see the reason why. Hiding in the bushes there is another Thrush. It is the mate that he has wooed and won, and she is busily at work making her home. Every few minutes she looks up and listens to the sweet music. She has a heap of grasses before her; she stands on these working them in and out in a wonderful manner with her sharp beak. She turns slowly round and round, pressing her breast downwards, and after a few hours she has made that untidy heap of grass into a beautiful cup-shaped nest. Now

THE CHORISTER OF THE VILLAGE

and then she flies away, and on her return she has in her beak a lump of mud. This she plasters on the interior, and when there is a good supply she again uses her breast to smooth it over. As she again goes off we notice her breast feathers are covered with mud, but she still continues with her work. For a few minutes the notes above cease, there is a pleasing chuckle from the bird at work, and we see standing by her side and admiring her efforts, her mate. For a moment or two he looks at her, then flies off, and presently returns with a bunch of dried grass in his beak. This he hands to the builder, she takes it from him and he goes off for more. And so the scene goes on. Day after day for nearly a week the birds work, then one morning we look into the nest and see a blue egg. Such a beautiful blue, too, a deeper shade than an April sky, and on it there are several black spots. Four days later there are five eggs, and all through the following days the bird sits upon them. Sometimes the singer above came down and took his turn at sitting while his mate went off to search for food.

At the end of a fortnight, five baby Thrushes appeared. As we wait near the nest and watch, we see how both parents bring big beakfuls of worms, and what a struggle there is amongst the youngsters to be the first at the edge of the nest as the parents approach. The ones nearest to the latter receive the

MORE STORIES FROM BIRDLAND

whole of the food, but we will also see that if one baby obtains a larger amount of food than its brothers and sisters, it just goes to sleep and so leaves a supply for those which remain awake. Between the feeding the male would mount to his high perch and sing several bars of his song. All through the day from sunrise to sunset they fed them, but as the sun went down, the mother would carefully settle on the nest, spread her warm wings over it, so that throughout the night the young were kept cosy and warm. And it was at this time that the chorister gave out his best notes. Right on until it was nearly dark the music rang out over the village, and again before the sun rose his music commenced.

With such a persistent singer, it was only to be expected that the mother did most of the feeding. But one day the male brought to the nest a large cockroach. He was holding this across its middle, and as he stood on the edge of the nest there was a great scuffle amongst the young to obtain it. He placed it in one wide-open beak, but it just lodged across the base, for the baby could not swallow it. He tried another beak, and the same thing happened. Into all five beaks he placed the food, and each time the young Thrush found it impossible to swallow this tit-bit. The father seemed disappointed. He made another attempt, and again failed. Then he thought



THE THRUSH

THE CHORISTER OF THE VILLAGE

for a moment, and worked the creature about in his beak until he had hold of its tail. Now he tried again, pushing it into a wide-open beak head first, and he found that it went down. The lucky youngster gave a few big gulps and the cockroach disappeared. The male had learned a lesson, for on each subsequent occasion that he brought one of these creatures, he always handed it to a young bird head first.

The five young were eventually reared. They left their old home, and their parents led them out into the thick bushes, and for another week fed them. Then another nest was built, and again for a fortnight the male went to his high perch and sang. And so he kept on to the end of June, and at that time when the hedges were a mass of pink with wild roses, his song ceased. Just now and then in July we heard a few bars of his notes, but although his song was finished he was still with us, and he and his mate had reared nearly a dozen young Thrushes.

Some of us are already looking forward to hearing his song again, for it is the best time of the year, when the seasons are young, that he sings. There are few spots in this world more beautiful than an English village, amongst trees, green meadows and lakes, and it is made better still when a chorister sits above, and sends out his loud notes over the world beneath, to tell us that the spring has really come.

CHAPTER IX

THE ELF OF THE HAWTHORN

THE hawthorn bush stood in a little corner of a piece of waste ground. All around it there was a carpet of yellow, for the cowslips were in full flower when the Garden Warbler arrived.

He came up from the distant South, where amidst warmth and plenty he had spent the winter months. April was almost over when I first heard his beautiful song, and it was fortunate that he had not arrived a week earlier, for the weather had been cold, and cold north winds will kill numbers of these little travellers on their journey. For it is a long and perilous journey that they undertake, of several thousand miles, and besides winds they meet with many other dangers on their way. Hundreds are killed by striking against the glass of lighthouses at night. They fly into the bright beams, at a great pace, hit the glass and are instantly killed. To the sailors on the sea the lighthouses and lightships have always been guiding lights, but to these small travellers they are death-traps. Now, however, many of the chief lights on the birds' course have several perches placed around them. The birds see these before striking the glass, perch upon

THE ELF OF THE HAWTHORN

them and rest until daylight, and thus thousands of small lives have been saved.

It was impossible not to know that the Garden Warbler had arrived, for wherever I went in that coppice I could hear his beautiful song. It is one of the richest songs of all the Warblers. The notes are practically the same as those of the Blackcap, but the two songs are easily distinguished. The Blackcap continues his notes for a minute or more, while the Garden Warbler gives them for only a few seconds at a time.

All through the day he sang, for he was calling his mate, or uttering his sweet notes to let her know that he was about, and as soon as she arrived in the coppice, he would redouble his notes, and sing even louder. The male arrives, as a rule, several days before his mate, and during the whole time of nest-building he sings, and even continues until the young leave the nest.

It was three weeks after his arrival that he and his mate began to build their nest. It was a fragile little structure, made on one of the horizontal branches of the hawthorn. First of all a few fine dried grasses, probably a few pieces of straw, and lined nicely with horsehair. Four eggs were laid, mottled with brown, and it would be difficult to find a bird more devoted to its eggs, if you searched Birdland over.

MORE STORIES FROM BIRDLAND

Many a time I have walked right up to a bush in which a Garden Warbler had its nest, then gently moved a branch aside, and watched the bird upon its eggs. And if you should place your hand near, the bird will leave, but only a few inches, and these plucky little Warblers will often gallantly defend their homes. I have had them fly excitedly in my face, peck at my hands, and do all possible to drive the supposed enemy away. But my experience has been that, if you are gentle in all your movements at the nest, and show the bird that you do not mean to molest her, next time you visit her she will have more confidence, and after a few days she will not be afraid of your presence in any way. It is really wonderful what friends you can make in the woods and fields if only you have patience and take a little trouble to be slow in all your movements. Nearly all the wild creatures will make friends with girls quicker than with boys. Although I have tried many times, I have never yet been able to induce a Robin to settle on my hand to take food, but I have known the same Robin go to a lady without showing any sign of fear.

The Garden Warbler sat upon her eggs for a fortnight, then the young arrived. At first the mother spent most of her time upon the nest, keeping them warm, only popping off for a minute or so to find food for them. The male now began to bring insects to



THE GARDEN WARBLER

THE ELF OF THE HAWTHORN

the nest; he would hand these to his mate, while she would pass them on to the babies. After three days of guarding her young, she divided her time in searching for food and brooding upon them, and often while she was away, the male Warbler would cover the young with his warm feathers.

One spring morning, tragedy entered into this small home in the hawthorn bush. The mother bird left the nest hurriedly to chase an insect amongst the branches, and in doing this she flew against one of the sharp thorns. This pierced her neck, and she died from the wound. She just managed to reach the nest, then spreading out her wings she dropped dead.

I was anxious to find out if the male Warbler would continue to feed the young, and kept a careful watch upon him. We removed the dead Warbler, and all through that day he continued to bring food to the nest, and at night settled down upon his four young.

I am strongly of the opinion that most birds mate for life; this applies equally to those which remain with us all through the year, and those which come from the distant countries of the South to spend the summer with us.

Some birds when they lose their mates show great signs of grief, while others will carry on with their duties, and as soon as possible secure another help-mate.

MORE STORIES FROM BIRDLAND

But the most difficult task that I ever knew a bird widower to perform was to bring up a nest of five young Blackbirds. A cat was responsible for the death of the hen, about three days after the youngsters left the eggs. It was a dry summer, and worms were hard to find, but the male succeeded in rearing the whole family, although the latter had to put up with short rations. I often saw him at work, and he kept at it from sunrise to sunset, and at night brooded over the babies.

His sorrow, however, was short-lived, for on the very day that the youngsters flew from their home, he wooed and won another mate. Another nest was quickly built, and a second family brought up !

A week later I went to the Garden Warbler's nest again. I saw the little bird widower sitting at the top of the hawthorn bush, and down below him, all ready to leave the nest, were four plump young Warblers, showing that he had done his duty well.

All through the summer the family of five kept in the coppice, then with the approach of the colder nights of autumn, they just disappeared, and I knew that they had gone away to fly those thousands of miles to a warmer country, where they would find plenty of insect food to keep them alive, and which it would be impossible for them to obtain in these islands of ours, where the weather is so changeable.



THE GARDEN WARBLER

THE ELF OF THE HAWTHORN

And so this elf of the hawthorn bush had successfully reared a family, although he had the misfortune to lose his mate. Year after year there is a pair of Garden Warblers in this favoured corner, and I often wonder if it is the same bird that I hear singing so beautifully there, as the seasons come round. It is at all times a charming corner of the coppice, for I seldom go there without finding or seeing something of interest, and in the spring months it is just a small concert hall of bird music; but the sweetest song that I have ever heard there is that of the Garden Warbler.

CHAPTER X

THE NEST IN THE OLD GREEN STUMP

THE stump was the ruin of an old tree. For probably a thousand years or more the oak had stood and thrived in that corner. Now it was a total wreck, and in a small hole a Robin had commenced her nest.

Every boy and girl knows and loves Robin Red-breast. But I wonder how many know the beautiful legend as to how the Robin got his breast of red? It is said that when Christ was hanging on the cross at Calvary, a little bird took pity upon Him, mounted to our Saviour's hands, and with its tiny beak tried to pull out the cruel nails. In attempting this the feathers on its breast became covered with blood, and ever afterwards, the descendants of this bird wore a breast of red in token of the great act of sympathy.

The bird at the stump began to build before the leaves appeared on the hedgerow near by, and at the time when the Garden Warbler arrived in the coppice, she was sitting upon her five eggs.

It was in the middle of May that the Robins began to build their second nest, and they took a whole



THE ROBIN AT HER NEST

THE NEST IN THE OLD GREEN STUMP

fortnight over it, but at the end of that time a warm, cosy and neat home had been built.

Now just at this time, a larger bird than the Robin had begun to take a great interest in this nest which was being built, and she sat on a branch of a tree about fifty yards away, and watched the birds at work. She was a silent bird, and we seldom heard her note, but her mate was the noisiest bird in the whole of the countryside, and from daylight to dusk he called incessantly : cuck-oo, cuck-oo. Now you know the name of the bird which was watching the Robins.

I think all young people know that the Cuckoo does not build a nest for herself. She lays her eggs in the nests of other birds, and allows them to bring up her young. I suppose I have been asked the question hundreds of times as to why the Cuckoo does not build a nest for herself, and rear her own family. In my opinion the answer is quite simple. The Cuckoo is about the largest bird which we have in the country which lives entirely upon insects which it finds amongst the grass, bushes and trees. Some, in fact most, of these creatures are very small, and it takes one Cuckoo the whole of its time to find sufficient food to keep itself alive, and if it was to attempt to rear a family, it would find it quite impossible to find enough to keep them all going, and the result would be that the race would soon die out.

MORE STORIES FROM BIRDLAND

After all, the Cuckoo is one of the most useful birds that we have in the country, notwithstanding that such an amount of abuse has been heaped upon it. It is the only bird I know that will eat large numbers of the hairy caterpillars that are so common during the summer, and in devouring these it does an enormous amount of good.

Well, the female Cuckoo watched the Robins building, and she knew when the first egg was laid. The following day, another egg was in the nest. From ten o'clock in the morning, until three o'clock in the afternoon, the Cuckoo had been sitting almost motionless on a branch quite a long way from the Robins' nest. But when three o'clock arrived, she left her perch, gave two or three flaps with her wings, then spreading them out to their fullest extent, she glided direct from her branch to the Robins' nest. Or rather she landed on the ground just beneath. Now the two Robins saw her, and flew violently at the stranger, and did their best to drive her away, for most of the smaller birds look upon the Cuckoo as an enemy. But the Cuckoo took no notice of these attacks, but went straight to the nest in the stump, carefully pushed herself into the hole, then just as carefully picked up in her beak one of the two eggs in the nest. Now holding this, she worked her body right over the nest, and laid her own egg in the

THE NEST IN THE OLD GREEN STUMP

place of that of the Robin, which she had just stolen. Directly she had laid her egg, she backed out of the hole, and flew away with the Robin's egg. Altogether, she was only at the nest for ten seconds, and when she left, the Robins on going to their nest found it just the same as before the stranger arrived. There were still two eggs there, and the nest had not been molested in any way.

The Cuckoo now flew off with the stolen egg, and she settled on a branch of a tree not very far away, and without wasting any time, threw back her head, crushed the egg in her beak, and swallowed the contents. Now flying off, she uttered her strange cry, which is very different from the note of the male; I can only liken it to a loud bubbling whistle. The familiar note, cuck-oo, is simply the song of the male.

Three days later the nest contained its full complement of eggs, four belonging to the Robin, and one to the Cuckoo. Thirteen days after the Robin began to sit, the young Cuckoo arrived. The first day it took no notice of the other eggs in the nest, and on the next morning there were four young Robins there. On the morning of the third day, however, the young Cuckoo seemed to know that there were rivals for food in the nest. Now, it is necessary that the bird should have a large amount of food, so it began

MORE STORIES FROM BIRDLAND

to turn the other birds out of their home. This energetic youngster went right to the bottom of the nest, got one of the baby Robins upon its back, then standing up as high as it possibly could, it just tipped it over the side. Going down amongst its nest companions again, it turned another out, and it did not cease until all four young had been pitched out. When the parents returned with food, they took no notice of the four young outside the nest, but confined their attentions to the young Cuckoo. The result was that the baby Robins died, and the greedy Cuckoo received all the food.

Of course the youngster grew quickly, and at the end of a fortnight it nearly filled the hole in which the nest was built, and two days after, left the stump and began to fly about. It settled in prominent places, and had all the food it required brought to it, until it was fully grown.

The Robins had brought up a whole family before the nest was built in the stump. The latter was their second nest of the season, for some birds will have three broods; but I think they were tired of feeding their strange baby, which grew much larger than themselves, and they did not attempt to build a third nest. All birds that I know except the Blackbird will build a fresh nest for each family, but the Blackbird will often rear three families in the same nest.



THE YOUNG CUCKOO

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THE NEST IN THE OLD GREEN STUMP

The young Robins of the first brood remained in the locality until the autumn. For a time their breasts were spotted, then they changed to a dull yellow, and afterwards to red, and it was now that they began to fight. It is a common belief in the country that the young Robins kill their parents in the autumn, but this is not the truth. One pair of Robins will haunt a certain locality, and they look upon this as their private preserve, and if other Robins attempt to enter this part, a fight takes place. It is now simply a question of the survival of the strongest, and if the young bird happens to win the fight, he takes possession of this tract of country, and his parent has to find fresh grounds. The usual result of these fights is, that the parents retain possession, and the young have to go farther afield.

The Robin is at all times a pugnacious bird, and I have known two instances of a male Robin fighting its own reflection in a pane of glass. One of these birds fought itself, as we might call it, until it broke a blood-vessel in its head, and died from the wound !

CHAPTER XI

THE SPRITE OF THE FURZE BUSH

IN the early part of the year, about the middle of March, the male Linnet, resplendent in his spring dress, saw a little hen Linnet in the furze plantation. He thereupon sang to her, showed her the beautiful colours on his feathers, and did his best to prove to her that he was the finest-looking bird, and also the best singer in the whole of Birdland. The result was that the little hen believed all he told her, and from that day onwards they were mates.

There was a lot of discussion as to where the nest was to be built. One favoured one spot, the other wanted it in a different place, but eventually a site equally favourable to both was chosen, and it was on the same furze-covered common that they first met.

The whole common was a sea of gold when they began building. It was the best time of the year, too, in the first week of May. Beneath the common was a wood, and from there and all around there was a great chorus of song. The Linnet's song was one of the least in that chorus, but notwithstanding that, it was one of the sweetest.



THE LINNET

THE SPRITE OF THE FURZE BUSH

The hen did most of the building, the male brought grasses to her, and she collected some, and at the end of a week a beautiful little cup-shaped home was made, cunningly concealed amongst the flowers. Five pale green eggs were laid, covered with small spots. The hen sat on them most of the time, but when she was away searching for food, her mate took her place. Often he brought food to her, and it was a pretty sight to watch him sitting on the edge of the nest, passing the food from his beak to hers.

For a fortnight they sat upon the eggs, then five skinny little creatures arrived and it was a sign for both birds to get busy. For the first four days, one bird always remained on the nest to brood over the babies, for when these birds are quite small, it is necessary for them to be kept very warm. When a cold spell of weather has set in during the spring, as often happens in this changeable climate of ours, I have found young birds dead in the nest, showing that the parents did not cover them sufficiently.

The food brought to the nest was partly digested by the parents before passing it to the young. Some parents, when they bring food to their young, give all they have collected to the first baby that opens its beak, but the Linnet is most careful to go round and round the nest, placing a small quantity of food in each little beak. I expect my readers wonder how

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it is that all the birds receive an equal supply in the former case? When a young bird has had enough, it does quite a sensible thing, that is, it closes its eyes and goes to sleep, so leaving plenty of food for its wide-awake brothers and sisters.

One morning, while I was watching these sprites of the furze bush, I saw a very pretty little scene at the nest. The hen was covering her young, and the male returned with a supply of food. Directly he landed on the edge of the nest, the hen rose, stood on the side, and partly opened her wings, vibrated them very quickly, and uttered a low plaintive note. Cock Linnet was now puzzled. There were five hungry babies beneath him, all with their beaks wide open, and calling for food, and also there was his little brown mate asking for a meal. What was he to do? For a short time he hesitated, then passed all the food that he had brought to his mate. For a whole minute he stood by her side, and just before flying away, he turned towards her, touched the tip of her beak with his, and instantly flew away. I do not know if birds ever kiss, but it certainly looked as if he had done this!

Now the hen was puzzled. She was hungry herself, and still those five babies called. Mother-love, however, prevailed, and without more hesitation she gave the food to them, then once more brooded over them.

THE SPRITE OF THE FURZE BUSH

The young had been in the nest for ten days, and were becoming fine plump Linnets, when a tragedy almost entered into the happiness of that little home in the furze bush. A Weasel had for some days been aware of the nest, but the prickles of the bush had prevented him from climbing up to it and taking the young. But this morning he was hungry. All night he had been unsuccessful in his hunting, and hunger will prompt these wild creatures to perform bold acts. He was already under the bush, before the hen Linnet became aware of the robber beneath. She sat tight and watched him, with her small body throbbing with fright and anxiety for her young, for these little birds of the wild seldom seem to think of, or consider, their own safety when it comes to protecting their young. All their thoughts are for them.

Now the Weasel began to climb. At first the thorns baulked him, but hunger won, and he was getting nearer to the nest. The Linnet knew that she must act quickly if she was to save her youngsters, so she just tumbled out of the nest, passing quite near the Weasel, and lay on the ground beneath. As she fell, she called as loudly as she could, and other birds in the immediate neighbourhood at once recognized the call as one of distress, and came flying quickly to the scene. The Linnet's mate was one of the first

MORE STORIES FROM BIRDLAND

to arrive, and he fluttered helplessly above the bush. A noisy Blackbird darted down towards the robber, and two Chaffinches joined in the attack. The Weasel was now stopped by the furze prickles, he could not get actually to the nest, so turned his attention to the trembling bird lying on the ground. Jumping nimbly down, he landed not far from her, and this is just what the Linnet wanted him to do, for now she began to drag herself along the ground, and if you had been watching, you would have said at once that she had a broken wing, for one was hanging limp and apparently helpless at her side. However, on she went, with the hunter following, with a series of curious little hops, sniffing to right and left as he went. The other birds were flying above, and they had been joined by others, but the two actors in this scene were both unconscious of them, for one was intent on saving her young, and the other was more than anxious for a breakfast.

Over the grass the Linnet still travelled, always keeping just out of reach of the springs of the ugly little phantom which was following, and now she was fifty yards from the nest, but still went on.

A Sparrow Hawk, out for his early meal, was flying leisurely over the edge of the wood, towards which the hunted and hunter were travelling. He heard the commotion of the birds which were noisily following



THE LINNET ON HER NEST

THE SPRITE OF THE FURZE BUSH

the chase, and quickened his pace. With one accord, the Blackbirds, the Chaffinches and Thrushes disappeared into the wood, for they all recognized the big outlaw of the air, and did not want to get in his way.

The little Linnet in the grass was too intent on dodging her enemy to see the Hawk, and the Weasel also did not observe him. The Hawk above saw something light-coloured going through the grass, and with one wild swoop was down upon it. The Linnet dodged into the bushes, frightened and trembling. Her beak was open, and she panted for breath, for there seemed to be enemies all around.

There was a scuffle on the ground, a flutter of wings, a wild cry from the Weasel, and the next moment the Hawk rose slowly, carrying in his talons the lifeless body of the robber. I doubt very much if he ate it, for not many creatures will eat the Weasel, and I doubt if he would have struck at it if he had had more time to see what it was.

The Linnet flew back to her nest, dodging through the bushes, and not showing herself more than possible, and on reaching it she was met by her mate, who had brooded over the young during her absence. She had, by a wonderful little ruse, which is practised by many wild birds, saved her babies. She had feigned a broken wing, and attracted the enemy all

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that distance from her home. If the Hawk had not, quite unconsciously, put an end to the incident, the Weasel would have returned later, and made another attempt to rob the nest.

The mother Linnet had now discovered that there were enemies about, and so it was her duty to get the young out of the nest as quickly as possible. She did it in this way. Instead of taking the food right up to the nest, she settled about a foot from it, and called her young. For two hours she refused to carry food to them, and one of the bolder of the youngsters ventured out towards her and was fed. In time others followed, and she quickly led them from the site of the nest to another part of the common.

In a week all five young were flying about, and they seemed to glory in the powers of flight, but they too found that their world was full of enemies, and that the first duty of a young Linnet was to keep its eyes open all the time during the day, and never to settle on the ground unless it could see that the place was clear all around. At last they were able to search for food on their own account and left their parents.

About the middle of June I was again walking over the common, and I found that the same pair of Linnets had built another nest, and were about to bring up another small family.

CHAPTER XII

BIRDS OF THE NIGHT

WHEN all the birds of the day have retired to their roosting haunts, there are many which will awaken from their sleep to begin a night of hunting. Many a bird which does not hide itself sufficiently is rudely awakened by finding itself in the claws of one of these large hunters of the night.

Both the Brown Owl, and its near relation the White or Barn Owl, will occasionally take birds, especially Sparrows while they are roosting, but their general food consists of mice, rats and beetles. Both birds do an enormous amount of good, and they might be called the best feathered friends that the farmer has.

I wish it was possible for me to take my readers out into the woods and fields and show them the systematic manner in which the Owls search for their food. The White or Barn Owl, which I think is the most beautiful of all our British Owls, will carefully quarter the ground, flying a few yards above the surface, carefully going up and down the meadows, and the instant the hunter sees a mouse it pounces down on to it, picks it up in its talons, flies to a mound

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or branch, and quickly eats it. Then off it goes again in search of more food.

The Brown Owl will also work the fields in this way, but it is often to be seen watching and waiting for a mouse or some other creature to appear. It will also walk the ground in search of beetles, of which this bird eats a great number. One nest of the Brown Owl which I knew of was built in a very favourable position for observation, and on bright moonlight nights it was possible to see easily the different kinds of food that the parents brought to the nest. I had always thought that the birds brought all kinds of food to their young during the night, but the birds at this particular nest kept strictly to one kind of food during each night. If they began feeding with mice, they brought mice all that night. On another night they would bring large moths, while on a third night they were seen to confine themselves strictly to beetles. I believe they did this to get their young used to all the different kinds of food to be found in the fields, so that when they went out hunting on their own account, they would be able to appreciate the varied fare.

When the young leave their nest, they are not able to hunt at once. For several weeks they still have the food brought to them as they sit on branches ; then later they follow their parents about, and watch



THE WHITE OWL.

BIRDS OF THE NIGHT

them capture the food. They are quick learners, and profit by all the mistakes that they make. At first many a mouse escapes from the novices, but practice makes perfect, and they soon acquire the knack of darting down quickly, and not giving the mouse a chance to run. I have seen a young White Owl drop down upon a mouse, but it was not quick enough, for the little mammal ran out under the bird's tail, and escaped, while the Owl looked around with an expression of wonder and disappointment upon its curious face.

The Brown Owl is a brave bird, and will guard its nest against any enemy that approaches too near. I have had the hen bird dash at me when I have been passing her nest. A few years ago, a friend of mine was passing along a country lane at night, and it was a really dark spring night, when he was suddenly attacked from behind, and his hat was knocked off and disappeared in the blackness. He thought a man had struck him, and turned round to face his assailant, calling upon him to come on and fight, but not a sound of any kind greeted him! To him it seemed a remarkable affair altogether, for he could neither see nor hear an enemy of any kind. The next morning he went along the same road to see if he could find his hat, and on passing the spot, he was attacked again on the head, and then he saw that the

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attacker was a Brown Owl which had a nest of young quite near.

A motor-cyclist passing along another road was attacked in very much the same manner by the infuriated mother Owl, but in his case the result was more serious, for he was knocked off his machine and rendered unconscious.

Last year there was a case of a gardener who approached the nest of the Brown Owl, and his face was so badly injured that he had to go to a hospital, and it was thought that he would lose the sight of both eyes, but fortunately this was prevented. But these few instances that I have quoted prove that this Owl is one of the bravest of all our British Birds. As a rule, the smaller the bird, the more pluck it seems to show. Some of the small Warblers will attack human beings if they go near their nests, while the great Golden Eagle will fly away long before an intruder gets near, and although it is such a big bird, it will not attempt to guard its nest in any way. The Raven, however, will often attack those who go near the nest containing young, and I well remember one bird that did her best to drive me away. She soared up about one hundred feet above her nest, then partly closing her wings, came down like a great feathered dart straight at me, only pulling up within a couple of yards of my face. At the time I was sitting on a

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ledge of a steep cliff, and it was rather an exciting experience to see the great black bird diving down towards me time after time. But it was photographs that I was after, and I had no intention of molesting her nest, and when I did leave the ledge and climb down the cliff, I took with me several interesting snapshots of the angry bird.

In the early spring, it is quite easy to attract the Brown Owl right up to a tree under which you may be waiting, by imitating its call. I have often shown the birds to my friends by calling them over in this manner. I was once out with a friend who had never seen an Owl, and he expressed a wish to see one fly past. I heard a bird calling about three or four hundred yards away. We hid under a tree, and I imitated the loud hoot several times, and a few minutes later we saw the bird coming towards us, and it settled in the tree just above, and my friend's wish was gratified.

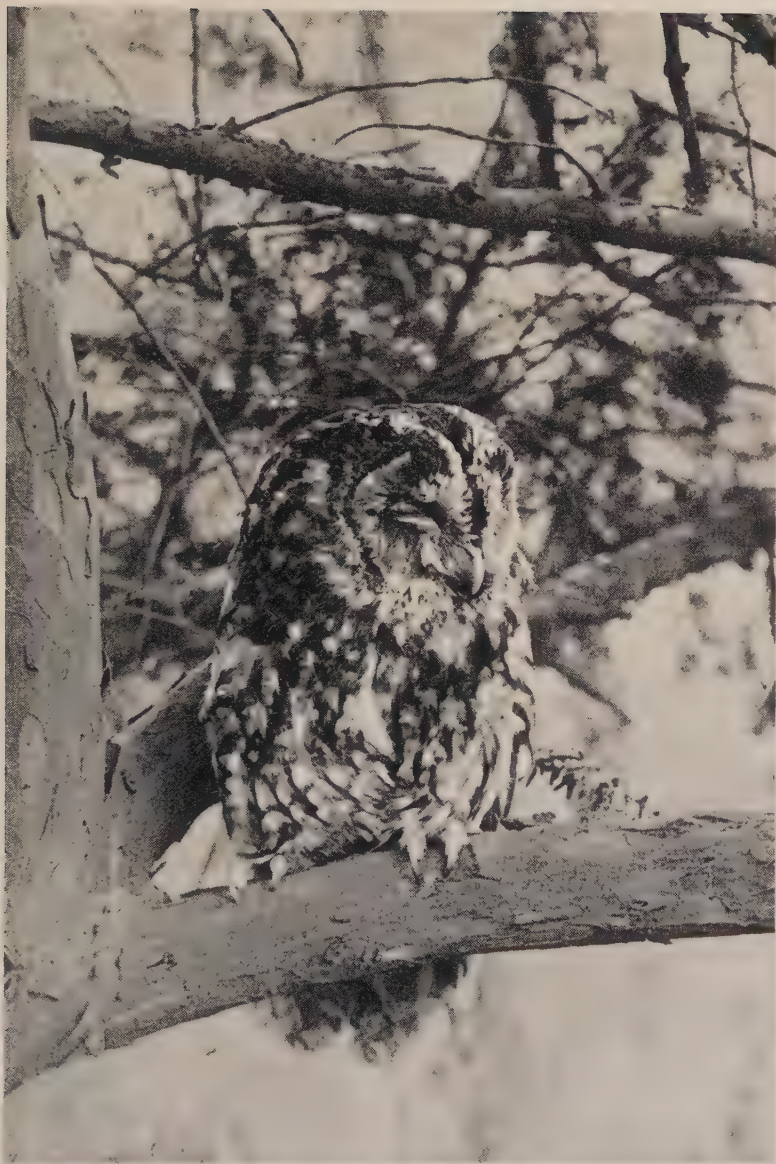
There is an Owl called the Little Owl which was introduced to this country about thirty years ago. Only about twenty pairs were liberated, yet now it has established itself, and it is found in most English counties and in parts of Wales. If a bird is taken from the nest when quite young, and brought up by hand, it will become very tame, and it makes a most delightful pet. It is a most proficient mouse-catcher,

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but I am afraid if it commenced mouse-catching in a dwelling-house, it might do a lot of damage, for the bird would be no respecter of ornaments if they were in its way !

The Little Owl builds its nest, or rather it makes very little attempt at nest-building, but lays its eggs, in a hole in a tree, in a disused pump, or even in a hole in the ground. As the bird hunts by day as well as by night, it is more frequently seen than any of our British Owls, and I have often come upon it when walking along our lanes. The note is a rather loud mew, something like the call of a cat, and in the springtime you may hear it almost everywhere in the midland counties. Just after sunset is the best time, and if you follow the call you will be able to get quite near the bird.

The Short-eared Owl builds its nest on the ground, but it is a rare species. We find it nesting in Norfolk, and in some of the northern islands. A few years ago there was a great plague of voles in the north of England, and they threatened to do a vast amount of damage to the crops. But Nature showed that she always has a remedy, and at the height of the plague, a large number of Short-eared Owls came over from the Continent and cleared them off. In so many instances man has interfered with Nature, by destroying all the birds of prey, that the balance has been



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much upset. He then finds that a mistake has been made, and it is almost impossible for him to put it right. In parts of France the inhabitants shoot and trap all the small birds that they can obtain, and the result is that insects are devouring the crops. Every bird, and in fact every creature that inhabits this earth of ours, has been placed there for a special purpose, and before man, with his game-preserving, egg-collecting, and shooting in general, upset the balance of Nature, everything went on as it was ordained to.

The woods and fields by day are just full to overflowing with bird-life, especially in the springtime, but at night, when all these wild creatures of the light have gone to rest, another world opens up, and to the observant lover of Nature, there is an enormous amount of interest all around. I want my young readers to learn to love Nature in all her moods. By day as well as by night; in storm and sunshine, summer and winter, for you can go on turning the leaves of the great book of Nature every day of your lives, and on the next you will find something just a little more interesting than that on the last, and the story that you read there will lead you in the end to the greatest goal of all—it will teach you to love the God of Nature, who made our world the beautiful and wonderful place it is.

CHAPTER XIII

FAIRIES OF THE WOODLANDS

SOME of my readers will no doubt be surprised to find a chapter in "More Stories from Birdland" dealing with two interesting little mammals. But Birdland is a broad place; it embraces the whole of the countryside, and those who are fond of birds will be equally as fond of the mammals, if they take the trouble to study their habits.

From the very earliest times, the woods were supposed to be the home of fairies. But those imps of our imagination, even if they were real, could not surpass the beauty of the wild creatures of the woods, and the most fascinating of them all is the Squirrel.

The Squirrel makes its nest near the top of the tall trees. It is a large round ball, very cosy inside, and in this he lives and sleeps. Unlike the Dormouse, which sleeps all the winter, he comes out on warm bright days, and I have often seen him playing in the tree-tops on fine winter mornings.

But it is the warmth of spring that makes the Squirrel really frisky, and at the end of April or early in May we often see them going about in pairs, and

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having glorious games amongst the branches of the big trees. The Squirrel is very inquisitive, and if you keep motionless he will come closer and closer to you. He frisks along, uttering a noise like a soft bark, but suddenly stands still and looks hard at the person below. With a light airy skip he comes nearer, and with his tail curled up and over his back he once more looks at you without making a movement. Now cautiously he moves closer, but if you move ever so slightly he is off. Now he runs to the other side of the tree, and the next thing you see is a brown nose, and a bright eye peeping round at you, and try as you will, you will find that you cannot get to him, for as you go round the tree he goes too, and always keeps the other side.

Squirrels love to play hide and seek amongst themselves, and they will then perform some wonderful feats, doing almost everything short of actually flying.

In the summer the nest is built of moss, dried grass and leaves, and is made quite secure against strong winds. In this warm home the little ones are born. Baby Squirrels are some of the most lovable little things in wild nature, and when they are able to leave their nest, they play great games amongst the branches. If a stranger should approach them, one of the parents will quickly give a note of warning, and instantly all the youngsters squat low on the branches and keep

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perfectly still. And there they will remain until a second call from the guardian tells them that the coast is clear again.

When the nuts are ripe the Squirrels collect them, and hide them in various little holes, cunningly concealed hiding-places which they alone know, and often on a warm winter day, they will leave their warm nests, come out into the sunshine, and after a frolic in the branches, go to their larders and enjoy hearty meals.

But the Squirrel is a cunning little thief. He is very fond of eggs, and will rob many nests. I have seen him coming from a hole in a tree, and when I looked in I saw a number of broken egg-shells. The hole had contained a nest of the Pied Flycatcher, and when the Squirrel found it, there were eight pale blue eggs there, but he broke all open and sucked the contents. As I saw him actually leaving the hole, I was able to prove that he was the thief.

One spring morning, I was hiding under a tree watching a bird on a lake near-by. I heard a slight noise, and on turning my head round I saw a Squirrel approaching. It walked right up to me, for I kept perfectly still, passed over one of my feet, ran nimbly up a tree against which I was leaning, went to a Rook's nest, and presently came down with a young Rook in its mouth.

Those of my readers who live on the borders of

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woods could, with a little trouble, attract the Squirrels right up to the house. All you have to do is to place a supply of nuts in a prominent place a short distance inside the wood, and when the Squirrels discover them, put another supply a few yards nearer your home. By doing this day after day, you will find that the engaging little animals will soon make friends with you, and eventually you will be able to put the food on a window sill, and they will come there for it without showing any signs of fear.

It is not every boy or girl that knows that in our hedgerows, especially those on the margins of woods, there is a miniature Squirrel. It is really a pretty mouse, but in its habits is very much like the larger brown sprite of the woods.

The name of this small creature is the Dormouse. You will know him from all the other wild mice that are found in the country, for he has a plump, reddish-brown body, so soft that one would imagine that there were no bones underneath. His tail is bushy at the end, and his feet are small and well padded, but they are strong, and with his tiny fingers he can climb cleverly. The ears are round, and the face is not long like that of the mouse we find in our houses. When you see him first, his wonderful eyes attract you most, for they are big, like two black diamonds, and seem to be filled with a beautiful softness.

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For nearly six months of the year the Dormouse sleeps ! All through the frosts and cold of winter he is rolled up in a tight ball, hidden away in his cosy nest in the hedge-bottom. Last October, if you had watched him, you would have noticed how he collected dried grasses and leaves, and made a warm home for himself. He also collected food, and when he went inside for that long, long sleep, he was very plump.

When the cold days arrived, he became very drowsy, and if we could have watched him in his round nest, we should have seen him rolling himself into a little ball. He tightly closes his eyes, and his tail is curled over his face. His small feet are tucked inside, and a more comfortable little sleeper it would be hard to find.

And so begins the winter sleep of the Dormouse. For nearly six months he will remain motionless, and all unconscious of the world around him. The winter will come with its cruel storms, its piercing winds and icy grip, which mean death to so many creatures of the wilds, but the small brown mouse still sleeps. Hidden down there he is secure from all the perils of winter, and it is not until the real warmth of spring arrives that he awakes.

The warm sunshine of an April day sends a little ray of brightness into the hedge, and it alights upon the nest. Inside there is a tiny sigh. One of his



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tightly clenched claws slowly opens ; the tail slips off his face ; another little leg is poked out and he falls over on his side. Slowly, ever so slowly, the small body unrolls ; his legs are stretched out like arms, and at last he slightly opens his eyes.

The entrance to the nest has been covered with falling leaves, and he pushes his way through. What a wonderful world it is he looks upon ! When he went to sleep, the winter was coming, now all around are the flowers and beauty of spring. There he sits, shivering and blinking, those two big eyes looking like brilliant beads. The sunshine revives him, and he searches for food. In his nest he placed some nuts, and presently he comes out with one of these in his small paws. He sits up, holding it to his mouth, soon nibbles a hole through, and enjoys the contents.

What a glorious sleep he has had ! Now he will live a life full of adventure, and if you hide by the hedgerow and watch, you may be rewarded by seeing him swinging amongst the branches, or playing with others of his kind amongst the leaves.

CHAPTER XIV

BIRD PHOTOGRAPHY FOR BOYS AND GIRLS

IN the spring and summer there is no more fascinating hobby for boys or girls than nature photography. You go into the woods or fields, you enjoy in many cases a day's really good sport, and you have the satisfaction of knowing at the end of the day that you have not taken a single life, and you feel even more satisfied than you could do after you had returned from a day with the gun or hounds.

No special apparatus is required to take photographs of bird-life. I have seen some wonderful pictures of wild birds taken by two schoolboys with a Kodak. They were small, but were so good that they could be enlarged to the size of those appearing in this book. But those who wish to obtain successful photographs should invest in a quarter-plate stand camera and tripod, or field camera, as it is usually called, with a long extension of bellows, and an instantaneous shutter fitted, preferably behind the lens. With this apparatus the amateur can go out into the fields and return with excellent pictures of the wild life to be found there.

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The nature photographer who wishes to make a success of the work should first obtain a thorough knowledge of the subjects he wishes to take. He should then be possessed with a fair amount of patience, and train himself to keep still for long periods. He must be prepared for disappointments, for there are many in this work, but success comes to those who persevere, and providing you know the habits of the birds, and possess a fair amount of common sense, you are sure to be rewarded with some interesting pictures.

The best time to obtain photographs of birds is when they are nesting. But I have found that many young naturalists are so eager that they cause the birds to desert their homes. You should never keep a bird off its eggs for more than two hours, for if the owner does not return in that time it is certain that there is something wrong with your hiding-place, and the bird knows that you are there.

First you find your nest, and quite the best way to do this is to watch the bird, for sooner or later, if you keep still, she is sure to show you where her home is situated, or if you should see the male bird with food in his beak, he will, if you have patience, tell you exactly where his mate is sitting. Many times I have been led to a nest built in such a position that it would not have been easy to find it by searching.

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This only applies to our small field and hedgerow birds. With some of the larger birds of prey, it is difficult and at times exciting work searching for their nests. You first have to discover the haunts of such birds, and explore the surrounding country, keeping your eyes open meanwhile, and also your ears. At times it is fascinating in the extreme; you follow up clue after clue, often taking days over it, and when at last you have the satisfaction of seeing the bird in its own wild home, you feel more than satisfied for all your trouble, and later, if you succeed in discovering its nest and secure photographs of it, you feel far more satisfied than ever sportsman felt after a day's sport.

We will suppose that you wish to photograph the Hedge Sparrow feeding its young, and that you intend to use a quarter-plate camera with a lens of about six inches focus. First fix up your camera and focus the nest, placing a white pocket handkerchief in it and just over the young birds. By doing this you can tell the exact position of the nest on your focusing screen. When this is focused sharply, tie back the branches surrounding the nest and open it up as much as possible without disturbing it, removing any small twigs or leaves that obstruct the view. It is as well to remember that it is useless to attempt to photograph a nest which is right in the middle of

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a thick hedge, or under dark trees in a wood. You need a lot of light on the nest, and it is possible to find plenty in open positions.

Having focused the nest on your screen, and firmly fixed the camera in position, proceed to build your hide. Always fix up the camera first and build the hide over it. If you make the latter first, you will have untold trouble in trying to arrange the camera. Some bird photographers use a special tent, an imitation tree trunk or a dummy animal in which to hide. I have used all these things, and many more, but I have found that there is nothing to equal a natural hiding-place made of the actual surroundings near the nest.

When your camera is arranged, place a few sticks in the ground around it, and these should be just a little higher than the camera, then fasten one or two across the top tied to the uprights. Over these throw a piece of cloth—I often use sacks or a light overcoat—and cover the whole with branches, grass and weeds. You now have a perfectly natural shelter, providing you place sufficient cover on it, and if you get inside when the bird is not watching, you will not have to wait long for her return.

The shutter on the camera should be a fairly silent one, for if startled by any sudden sound like that made by a noisy shutter at the moment of exposure,

your photograph will be useless. If it is the usual form of roller-blind shutter, you can make it more silent by placing on all the cog wheels a mixture of blacklead and grease. This makes it work much slower, but that does not matter, in fact it is an advantage, for if your shutter is silent a quick exposure is not necessary. Or you may make a box to fit right over the front of the camera, covering the lens, leaving a hole in the front which is not small enough to cut away any of your view.

With a silent shutter, the exposure required for a bird feeding its young is about $\frac{1}{8}$ part of a second. If the shutter is at all noisy, an exposure of about $\frac{1}{100}$ part of a second is necessary. The two illustrations accompanying this chapter had an exposure of about $\frac{1}{8}$ part of a second.

If the bird photographer wishes to go in for more advanced work and take pictures of birds in flight, I recommend a focal-plane reflex camera with a long extension of bellows, and a Dallon tele-photo lens. Such an apparatus is expensive, but it will do everything that the naturalist requires.

The young naturalist should be equipped with a pair of field-glasses, as they are a great help in bird-watching, and many delightful little scenes of wild nature may be observed that it would not be possible to see clearly without their aid.



BLUE TIT

BIRD PHOTOGRAPHY FOR BOYS & GIRLS

In the winter months there is quite a lot of nature photography to be done, for at that time, especially if the weather is severe, it is easy to attract many wild creatures to the camera. Four species of tits will come to fat or a cocoanut; mixed seed will attract thrushes and blackbirds; very small seed, such as the mixture sold for feeding canaries, attracts hosts of Sparrows and other Finches, and one never knows what surprises are in store for them while waiting in their hiding-place.

The nests of birds make interesting pictures. Those built in hedges and trees are more difficult to take than those found on the ground. The chief fault to overcome is to endeavour not to get right over the nest. If you do take your picture from directly above, it gives quite a wrong impression as to what the nest is really like. It is as well to include some of the surroundings, as this adds greatly to the interest and value of such photographs.

When following the fascinating art of bird photography, many other interesting things will crop up, and these should always be taken advantage of. The chief charm of nature photography is that it takes you into the open air amongst the flowers and the songs of birds. It does not much matter what time of the year you go into the country, there is always something fresh to be seen, and Nature shows

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us something new whenever we visit her. I have never yet been out in the meadows or the woods, on the mountain or moor, without seeing or hearing something worth going for, and I shall never regret having taken up, when a boy, the fascinating hobby of bird-hunting with a camera.

A SHORT DESCRIPTION OF THE CHIEF BIRDS AND THEIR EGGS MENTIONED IN THIS BOOK

Black-throated Diver.—*Average length*, twenty-six inches. *Prevailing colour*, black and white. *Eggs*, olive brown, spotted and blotched with dark brown and black. Two in number.

Carrion Crow.—*Average length*, eighteen inches. *Prevailing colour*, black, glossed with purple and green. *Eggs*, bluish-green, spotted and blotched with brown, olive brown and grey. Number varies from four to six.

Kentish Plover.—*Average length*, six inches. *Prevailing colour*, black, brown; under parts, white; markings on head, black and white. *Eggs*: stone colour, spotted and streaked with black. There are underlying markings of grey. Three in number.

Nightjar.—*Average length*: ten inches. *Prevailing colour*: dark brown and ash grey; under parts, orange-buff barred with dark brown. *Eggs*: creamy white, blotched and marbled with varying shades of violet-grey. Two in number.

Sparrow Hawk.—*Average length*: male, twelve inches; female, fifteen inches. *Prevailing colour*: upper parts, dark slate blue; under parts, dull white, barred with rufous-brown. Female: upper parts, brown; under parts, white, barred with brown. *Eggs*: white with a bluish or greenish tinge, blotched with handsome markings of reddish or dark brown. There is often one egg in the clutch which differs from the rest, having very few markings. Number varies from four to seven.

Jackdaw.—*Average length*: thirteen inches. *Prevailing colour*: upper parts, black tinged with grey; under parts, black with a greyish tinge. *Eggs*: green, spotted and blotched with olive and dark brown markings. Number varies from four to seven.

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Fulmar Petrel.—*Average length* : eighteen inches. *Prevailing colour* : head and neck, white ; back, grey ; under parts, white. *Egg* : white when quite fresh, sometimes sprinkled with many fine reddish spots. One only is laid.

Thrush.—*Average length* : nine inches. *Prevailing colour* : olive brown ; under parts, white with brown spots and blotches. *Eggs* : blue, spotted with round black markings. Number varies from four to six.

Garden Warbler.—*Average length* : five inches. *Prevailing colour* : olive brown ; under parts, greyish-white. *Eggs* : buff-white, blotched with reddish-brown. Number, four or five.

Robin.—*Average length* : five inches. *Prevailing colour* : olive brown ; breast, bright red. *Eggs* : creamy white, spotted with reddish-brown. Number varies from five to seven.

Linnet.—*Average length* : five inches. *Prevailing colour* : back, chestnut ; fore part of head, crimson ; breast, tinged with crimson ; under parts, dull white. The female has no crimson markings. *Eggs* : pale bluish-green spotted with small markings of reddish-brown. Number varies from four to six.

White Owl.—*Average length* : thirteen inches. *Prevailing colour* : back, orange-buff spotted with brown ; under parts, white, with several small, light brown spots. *Eggs* : white. Number varies from four to six.

Brown Owl.—*Average length* : sixteen inches. *Prevailing colour* : back, brown with darker markings ; under parts, buff-white with brown markings. *Eggs* : white. Number varies from three to five.

Little Owl.—*Average length* : eight inches. *Prevailing colour* : back, brown ; under parts, dull white, streaked with brown. *Eggs* : white. Number varies from four to six.

